


MIDSUMMER MADNESS

PART I

THE MARRIAGE EVE

 HE had never looked fairer, for the full moonlight fell on her bosom and arms, and threw into her sweet face a statuesque quietness. For a while the curious question of whether the garden were or not a fitting background for her beauty puzzled me; but soon, with a self-pitying smile, I gave my attention again to her whose inspirations governed mine. She was leaning against a great vase, from whose margin toad's flax and creeping violets—flowers she loved—hung in clusters, with odours floating about in almost tangible clouds.

We were to be married on the morrow, and I was excited and was scarce myself. I dared not think of my courtship; for the knowledge that her affection was too great a gift—that I was

indeed unworthy to approach that white, delicious creature whose subtle potency forced me against my will to love her—this knowledge, I say, confounded me beyond belief.

Fate had thrown us together, ironically matching a woman whose story was irredeemably sad with a man wounded in a thousand struggles, who bore no other trophy to lay at her feet than a dead youth. She had stooped with more than human tenderness, and had raised me to her breast, and pressed my head there until the heated brow had cooled, and the temple-throbbings ceased.

As time passed I essayed a question. Had it not been desecration I would have leaned forward and pressed that bare shoulder with my lips. As it was, the purity hindered me: I could as soon have kissed the heavens.

‘Once more, Phyllida, for the last time in our unwedded life,’ I said, ‘tell me, with all your heart, if you love me?’

I looked for her simple assurance, accompanied by the fond chiding that maddened me; and waited tremulously for answering. None such came, and looking into her face I saw a strange air of abstraction. Wounded by her indifference, I repeated my question.

She turned wearily. ‘Why do you ask?’ she said. ‘I have often said that I love you. Let me be silent for awhile—not alone, (seeing that I was

hurt, and that I moved away)—‘your presence is enough for me: to know that you are here, and that I may touch you when I will.’

Vainly enough, jealous perhaps of her thoughts, I now strove to compare Phyllida with the splendour of her surroundings; and pained by her apathetic humour, I fancied as my eyes glanced over the landscape that her beauty suffered in comparison. Behind us lay the half-ruined gables of Colmer Hall. Hebe’s urn in the terrace fountain was brimful of clear water, and the mantle of scarlet moss that time had spread over the statue seemed trebly luxuriant in the clare-obscure of the moonlight. The windows of the morning parlour were thrown open, and the lamplight showed those quaint thread-embroideries of fabulous beast and fowl and fish; one outcome of the over-exuberant fancy of Phyllida’s ancestress, Margot Colmer.

In front lay the choked fish-ponds, with their pretentious water-stairs and sleeping reeds. To the right the beech-planting with its vistaed alleys sloped down to a brawling river. To the left, through great elms, stretched the long barren view of fields and hills, chequered by mortarless limestone walls.

Then I looked again at Phyllida. I cannot attempt to describe her countenance in full. It did not approach any conventional type. White

and still and languid, with lips arched in the fashion old poets loved; clear-cut brows and perfect in fancifulness; in the chin power and voluptuous ease combined.

Hers was more than a woman's height. Her gown was of snowy silk; one of those ancient costumes of which there was such store in the presses; the style was of the time of Anne. Gorgeous arabesques were woven in metal thread on bodice and petticoat; pictures of woodbine-covered lattices, idylls of corn-fields, of spring flowers budding. Twisted about one arm was a long string of glittering sapphires: clasped on the other a Javan bracelet of rich filigrain inwrought with rubies.

I stood feasting greedily on the sight, whilst I scorned myself for attempting to compare her to anything earthly. Her bosom had moved more freely since she had discarded the bloodstone heart. I was glad of its disappearance, for she would never disclose, although I had often begged to hear it, the story of how it had become hers; and of late its presence had angered me unreasonably.

At last she looked up, and stretched her right hand to fondle mine.

'Mad genius,' she said gravely, 'can you burst into no wild ode about me? You are in the humour for tragedy. Remote as my thoughts have been, yet I have felt that you have wavered angrily

and striven to drive me into nothingness. But after all I am paramount.'

What could I do but lift her hand to my lips and press it until I was lost in the ecstasy of touching her flesh so for the first time. She withdrew it, seeing that I quivered from head to foot.

'Come,' she cried, with a mirth that I had never known her affect before. 'Come, let us return to the house. To-night, Rupert, of all nights, I have something to tell: something concerning the past I must make known.'

And she lifted her eyes to the moon, and held her hands fantastically forward, as if she expected the orb to fall from its setting. When she was wearied, she took my arm within hers and, leaning, walked to the entrance of the hall.

There the moonlight fell on the armed figures. The damascene breast-plates worn four centuries ago in French battles gleamed like Phyllida's gown. The bloody mort-cloth with the stained opals, that hung dusty and tattered by the door, twisted as if a strong current of air stirred behind. The lamp in the morning-room had burned so low that the air was tainted.

Phyllida left me, whilst I gazed at Anne Killigrew's portrait of James the Second and his queen. Was ever picture more ludicrous? Each crease of the royal draperies concealed a demon of dulness; in each feature of the royal countenances

was an excessive, wooden minuteness that deprived the dark, ugly faces of the faintest suggestion of life. The lacquer-framed tapestry to the left of the window offered as ever only a conflicting relief, for the enigma of the aureoled woman, who bore in her hand a bag of gold with the inscription *Holy Barbara bringeth Help*, could never be unriddled.

Suddenly a cry of wonder burst from my lips. A bust modelled in red clay had taken the place of the devotional book on the reading-table. It was the head of a man in the early prime of life, suave, handsome, and priestly: the brow was high and narrow, the mouth painfully compressed, the tonsure of such curls as would have graced a bacchanal. The crudeness of detail, and the luxuriance of fancy, showed me that Phyllida was the modeller.

A fierce murmur, like a wounded animal's, checked me as I laid my hand on the forehead to gauge its lack of breadth.

‘Touch anything but that! Do not let your hands corrupt it! Profane! profane!’

I turned aghast, to see Phyllida at my side. Her face was wan, her eyes red and swollen with tears. She seemed a pious witness of some random sacrilege.

‘What is wrong?’ I said. ‘What have I done? Am I so unworthy?’

Without heeding me she unfastened the bundle of papers she had brought, and having extracted several, she laid them on the table. Then, touching my arm, she motioned me to a chair, and in lamplight that dimmed and dimmed as the moon prevailed she began to read:—

'Sensuous hopes trampled upon; visionary joys despised. There is no future gladness. Destiny works. What are we more than a handful of faded leaves, tossed by the early winter wind? Some speed—others are checked and lie until corruption. I have reached a splendid goal; you, poor flower—poor slug-a-bed! . . . Alas! why should I chide, I of all men?'

'I do not understand,' I interrupted. 'Explain, Phyllida!' She gave no sign of hearing, but continued:—

'For our love had seemed impossibly great before. O heart of mine! is it that passion is dying—leaping high before burning out? I cannot breathe as I think of you—cannot sit, nor walk, nor lie, but must everlastingly fall with my spirit ebbing from my lips.'

At this I bowed my head and covered my eyes with my hand. What talisman gave Phyllida power to evoke such mental agony. The very fragmentariness of the selections maddened me. Each word seemed as if it might have been forced from me, or from one of my impossible heroes.

'You are mine for ever. Strive as you will against the gossamer network that I have flung over you; call on your God for assistance; curse me until you hate, and yet there is no remedy.'

The voice that had grown so soft as to be almost a whisper ceased now, and looking up I found that I was alone.

PART II

THE MARRIAGE MORNING

THE roofless building where Phyllida had desired our marriage to be solemnised lies in the outermost corner of the Colmer estate. I had only seen it once before; on a spring twilight when, reckless with undeclared passion, neither knowing nor caring whither I went, I had stumbled into the enclosure, where the scent of withering snowdrops filled the air.

Dreams that were beautified by traditions half understood before swept through my brain in the short disturbed sleep of the marriage morning. I saw Patrick Drassington killing the last wolf in England on the Wyke Quicksand, saw him staggering homeward to the manor-house with the monstrous head in his arms, and the wound in his side vomiting life-blood. Legends I had gleaned from the Colmer records came on in rapid succession:—I traced the histories of the Princess Ursula from Ravenna, who married Elizabeth's favourite, and slew herself so that on her deathbed

she might hear her husband declare his love revived; of Margot Colmer, who laid down her life for Charles the Second; of faithful Driden, the steward, who, like Catherine Douglas, strove to save his master at the cost of his right arm. A thousand other pictures followed. Indeed, I was just in the act of mounting a pillion to ride before a woman in sea-green paduasoy when I woke to find the sun risen, and the clock in the house-place striking four.

My wedding clothes lay beside the bed; I gazed at them for some time ere I rose, scarcely believing my own happiness; then, when I sprang to the floor, I drew aside the window curtain and looked down into the orchard. The cherries had ripened in the night; they were large and lush, with wasps a-grovel in the bursting sweetness of their sides.

Never before had I been so slow or so proud about my toilet. The waistcoat my father had worn at his own nuptials was held up to the light at least twelve times so that I might catch the scintillations of the diamond buttons, and admire the white roses my mother had embroidered. There was a shade of vanity in my eyes as I stood before the mirror. After all, I was not ugly; for something in my face relieved its grotesque outline, and the change that had come of late—the flush that breathed in my cheeks, and the glad

dilation of the eyes—charmed me almost into egotism.

I had no friends to attend me to the chapel, for years ago I had broken with all the country gentry, and had lived like a recluse in Drassington Manor. Sometimes, but always vainly, I asked myself the true cause of this isolation; for the charge of infidelity was not of itself sufficient, and my writings, if they corrupted, corrupted out of the reader's wickedness. God knows that I wrote with a pure mind.

The world was glad, but drowsy withal; the songs of the birds were deadened, the chirpings of the grasshoppers less shrill, and even the shallow canal in the Pleasaunce (the canal I had planted with willows, in imitation of the Dean's work at Laracor) exhaled a sleepy odour. The path lay across ripening cornfields. Poppies were full-blown. I gathered a great bunch, for Phyllida loved them, and I fastened them in my waistcoat, intending to weave them in her hair.

She met me at the east entrance of Colmer Park. I ran open-armed to embrace her, but she drew back coldly.

'What do you mean?' she asked, looking into my face.

'How?' I cried. 'I am not late. I am here at the very moment!'

'You know what I speak of,' she replied coldly.

‘What do you mean by *being* at all? I was contented, happy even, before you came. The past had died and you have revived it. I am going to break the most sacred vows.’

‘Phyllida!’ I exclaimed in amazement. ‘What vows? I know that you have a past. Let us forget all our unhappiness—’

At this she raised her arm swiftly, as though she would strike me, then with a dull, heartless laugh she came nearer and caught my hand.

‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘I am as mad as you. It is well to be mad: we can suffer and enjoy a thousand times more keenly. Yes, Rupert, dear Rupert, lover, husband, mournful already, I can tell of what you are thinking. You are white now—there are red circles round your eyes.’

‘Hush!’ I faltered. ‘If you read me well you will be silent. This morning I cannot endure at once to see your beauty and to hear your words!’

If I were nearly mad before, the sight of Phyllida, as she stood filled with conflicting emotions, was sufficient to blast for ever the few shreds of reason left me. She no longer wore a virginal colour, but a long rippling gown of flame-coloured silk, whose lowest hem was wrought round with yellow tongues. Her face was more tender, her chin trembled, and those eyes, into whose depths I had gazed for hours, and seen no change in their coldness, were filled with warmth and light.

When I had feasted on the sight I leaned forward, and clasping her neck and waist drew her to my bosom. There I held her until she cried out; but even then my arms would not relax, and she was compelled to extricate herself with a charming force. Being my first full embrace it made me delirious. She began to laugh again, childishly, silverily, and taking my hand she paced slowly at my side along the way that led to Stony Mountgrace.

We reached the ruined doorway, and stood beneath its wealth of carved foliage. The sound of boys' singing came from within. Phyllida herself had arranged everything with the old vicar of Drassington. How she had conquered his scruples against reading the ritual in a roofless building I never knew; but the place was still consecrated, and the altar tomb of Elizabeth Colmer, which in past days had been used as the holy table, still stood in the chancel under the east window, where the stained glass of Saint Anthony, with the human-faced swine crawling up his pastoral staff, cast subtle hues on the broken floor.

The words of the marriage hymn were indistinctly sung: the choristers' voices sounded cold and sharp, and the vicar looked almost frenzied with impatience.

'How is this, madam?' he said, with his

bearded face drawn into the severest lines. 'You beg me to come here as a favour, and when, after the considerations laid before me I agree, you keep me waiting until an hour after the appointed time!'

'An hour?' I gasped, looking not at the vicar, but at Phyllida. 'An hour late! Why we met at the moment——'

Phyllida was triumphant. 'Silence,' she whispered. 'I cannot explain, unless that we have dreamed.' She turned to the ascetic. 'I am ready to atone in any way for my fault,' she said contritely. 'Forgive me, sir, it was unavoidable.' And she made her eyes so pleading that he had been no man had he not calmed instantly and forgiven her for her guiltless offence.

'Enter,' he said. 'It is almost too late. Had you been absent five more minutes you would not have found me here.'

As we reached the apse the voices of the choristers swelled loudly, before dying in a long sustained murmur, and the vicar, with his tattered black-letter book held near his eyes, began to read the marriage service. Not a word did I understand: I repeated automatically when I was bidden to repeat, I forced the ring on Phyllida's finger at the ordained time. But all the while I thought of naught, or spiritual or sensual, save her incarnate loveliness.

Phyllida was mine now! Phyllida was mine now! Daintily I lifted her hand to my arm, and with the echo of the vicar's shrewish congratulations ringing in our ears we moved into the mid-day sunlight, and began to walk towards Colmer.

'You are my wife,' I said. 'Mistress Drassington, we are out of everybody's sight—these trees will hide us—you need have no shame in kissing me here.'

She made no reply: I turned towards her, imagining that she was wrought beyond speech. We had reached the Syne Marie Wood, where the great conifers screened off the sun. But one dusky shaft crowned Phyllida, and sliding from her head struck her fingers and danced there. Her face was set, her eyelids had fallen.

'Tell me, love,' I murmured. 'Let me help you: you know you are mine now. One kiss, just one, my meed if I have ever given you an instant's happiness.'

Neither word nor movement responded. She was impenetrably silent: her flame-coloured gown became a barrier of defence: I dared not touch her.

'Phyllida,' I entreated. 'My wife!'

Those woebegone eyes were raised slowly. 'Wife,' she said, like one in a dream, 'I am no wife. I am true, true as Heaven itself. Do not write again, I will be true.'

Suddenly her face changed terribly, and she

drew herself to her full height. 'For God's sake, Rupert Drassington!' she cried, 'for God's sake tell me that it is not so!'

'What, dearest?' I said.

'My terror—that we are man and wife.'

'I am yours and you are mine—my wife—my wife.' And my tongue dwelt on the words with delight.

But Phyllida left my side, and, sitting on the trunk of a newly-felled tree, wept as her poor heart would break.

PART III

THE MARRIAGE NIGHT

A DULL fear troubled me from the moment when Phyllida, with many piteous words, begged me to leave her to herself until evening. Her face was averted all the time, although I strove to make her look at mine, in the belief that my agony at this phase might excite her pity and compel the confidence she withheld.

Assured that she loved me with all her soul, I had no distrust of her. Phyllida was the perfection of purity; in what I knew of her past she

had shone with a splendid chasteness, and not a breath had sullied her repute. The curious letters she had read the night before told of nothing but the holiest love, and the insinuation concerning an influence that would prevail was nothing more than a poet's fancy. I had conceived many such : in my story of *Hope Deferred* Michael strives to bind Mary so, and despite her fears of being his bond-maid for ever, at the dawn of a stronger passion, a stretching of the limbs, a higher inspiration breaks lightly asunder the shrivelled withes, and Michael becomes a memory and no more.

Thus, to a great extent, must it be with Phyllida. At the birth of her love for me she had broken most of the bonds—broken them unwittingly : for to-day she was unaware of her freedom, fancying that the past still held her and that she had sinned against fidelity. I knew otherwise ; the few films of gossamer that remained would soon disappear and leave her entirely mine.

Yet was I depressed ; and when, after her entreaties had wrung the promise from me, and she had begun to return to Colmer alone, I took her seat and followed with my eyes, as with a step uncertain and often lingering, she threaded the intricacies of the wood. When she had disappeared I prepared for a disinterment of memories.

The aromatic scent of the resin, as it oozed from the heated bark, overburdened the air. In a distant glade the light played so daintily that I amused myself by picturing seraphim sliding down the beams. I moved there and rested amongst sun-stricken trees, whose perfect silhouettes fretted the ground. A ripe-berried mountain-ash grew near—how it came in a fir-wood I cannot imagine—and a culver, undisturbed by my silent presence flew to the key-twigg and perched there crooning, until the leaves shook, and then all the boughs, and finally the trunk itself.

Had I been prophetic in my early writings? Had I suffered in the anguish I felt when writing the last chapter of *Hope Deferred* (in which Mary Blakesmoor loses her wifely love and becomes self-concentrated) a foretaste of my own doom? . . . Moreover in *Alnaschar's Bride* the fairest hopes were blasted. . . .

But Phyllida was different—was stronger and purer than any of these visioned heroines; and surely I had a firmer purpose than their lovers? Nay, as much as she excelled the women in beauty, I excelled the men in strength of will. I would not be thwarted. Who grapples with fortune conquers, and I would conquer!

What folly ramping in my brain made me imagine that such puppets could resemble my

living wife ! I began to accuse myself of faithlessness, and grew desirous beyond endurance to touch her hands.

How slowly the afternoon faded ! The day had been too fine for a gorgeous sky, so the sun, contented with his work, descended quietly into the tops of the distant trees, shook himself there for awhile, and then sank out of sight, leaving the clouds stained bright yellow. Soon after his departure a grey curtain crept up to the zenith, and blotted out the few stars that had already appeared.

I rose, determined to return to Colmer at a snail's pace. If I walked speedily I should reach the house before the time Phyllida had appointed : I might disturb her in the act of conquering her last few remembrances, and cause the past to rise drossily. My sadness left me, and I grew happy once more. As I loitered I drew one by one from my vest the withered poppies, and detaching the petals, let one fall at every step, giving to each flower a verse from some ancient ballad.

When all my poppies were destroyed I be-thought myself of an image from Spenser's 'Ruines of Time,' and laughed again and again. It was of the ivory harp with golden strings that the poet saw borne up to heaven. Ah, my joy—*mine!*—was assured ! No malicious intervention could hold me

from it now. In one short hour, in one short hour !'

Twilight deepened into evening as I walked ; soon large drops of rain began to fall, and the parched vegetation cried aloud with joy, as its fibres relaxed and its thirsty flowers drank their fill. There was a numbness in the air that foretold a thunderstorm before morning.

Thrice a light blanced the heavens, showing me the distant avenue that led to the garden. The lime-trees were in full bloom, and the heavy shower beat the flowers to the ground. Scarce had my foot touched the velvety grass ere from the distance came the sound of voices in impetuous discussion. My wonder was great at any human creature's daring to walk in these weird precincts after nightfall.

The voices were those of a man and a woman ; the one commanding, the other pleading earnestly. They were coming rapidly towards me. Indeed I could already distinguish something black moving beneath the limes.

A flood of bombast rushed to my lips. The desire for something discordant almost overpowered me, forcing me to rack my brain for some bizarre sarcasm wherewith to distract the love-making of these country sweethearts. Soon their speech resolved into distinct words ; it seemed as if they lingered.

‘Nay, leave me! Take me no further! Was ever woman so tortured?’ one cried loudly.

‘Was ever woman so false? was ever woman so unworthy?’ the other replied.

‘But I swear, Cuthbert, I will not come. Oh, let me return! I love him—this very moment he is waiting for me. My darling Rupert, my husband. I *will* return.’

At these words I felt my stature lengthen: then sight, speech, everything left me save the quickened sense of hearing.

‘Do you remember the old promises? Fool! to think of contending against my influence—to dream of setting that dullard’s power against mine! You are mine, planned so by God, joined to my soul in implacable union. Come, Phyllida.’

Silence followed.

Phyllida was false and I was wifeless. I leaned against the trunk of a lime, waiting for the last sight of the woman who had betrayed me so pitifully.

The footsteps approached nearer, and ere long a man passed. He was more fragile than I, and his long form was shrouded in a black cloak. His arms waved from side to side in magnetic rhythm, and his white face and hands shone like those of a corpse. I watched him, spellbound; and when he had gone a little way I heard

the voices begin anew. It was illusion—magic—anything but the terrible thing I had feared. The relief made me fall, face downwards, to the sodden grass.

In less than half an hour I entered Colmer Hall. Hester, Phyllida's old nurse, came to me at the foot of the staircase, and laid her hand upon my shoulder.

'Madam—nay, pardon me—my lady, bade me say that she would be in the morning-parlour. She has waited long.'

I turned the handle of the door, and was confronted by darkness. Yet was I not appalled, for I could understand Phyllida's delicacy in wishing that our first meeting should be where her blushes might go unseen. I stole to the window, and sat on the praying-stool, with my eyes travelling through the gloom to her place. For the fourth time the sky blanched, and I saw her beside the table, resting her head on her hands, with her hair spread over shoulders and bosom in rippling swathes.

At last, wounded by her indifference, I spoke, and destroyed a delightful hope that she would bid me welcome.

'Phyllida!'

The old silence. I knew that she must be in one of those wonderful depths of feeling that she sometimes sounded, and felt proud of a woman

of such strange charms. But what had swayed in the mistress troubled in the wife.

‘Are we not in perfect sympathy?’ I cried.

Afraid of I know not what (the air in the room seemed turbulently struggling to pass through the closed windows), I opened the door and took one of the candles from a sconce in the hall.

‘Phyllida! Phyllida! Phyllida!’ I whispered, holding the light above my head. ‘I am here, sweet one, look at me!’

Still silence. Fiercely, perhaps, but still lovingly, I placed my hands beneath her forehead, to make her look upwards. At my touch a bundle of papers fell from her breast, and lay scattered on the floor. The clay bust I had seen on my marriage eve stood near: I thrust out my right hand angrily and broke it into fragments. The past was done with now! I had conquered! My victory made me exultant. Phyllida’s gossamer bonds were torn away for ever.

As I drew back the hair and let the candlelight fall softly on my wife’s face she sighed heavily.

‘Dead love has slain my passion,’ she said.